

**Michigan House of Representatives  
Appropriations Subcommittee on Community Colleges  
Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education  
Military and Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security  
May 31, 2011**

**Creating Opportunity and Success for Veterans:  
Veterans Programs at Ferris State University**

David L. Eisler, President

Rep. Goike and members of the Michigan House of Representatives, thank you for taking time from your busy legislative schedule to hear about educational efforts for veterans at Michigan universities. It is an honor to present these materials to you.

Support and encouragement for veterans is a personal interest of mine as president and I appreciate both your interest and willingness to help the men and women who have served our country in the armed forces. Ferris State University is proud of its efforts to assist veterans, and with your support stands ready to do whatever it can to help.

**The Experience of Veterans at Ferris State University**

For many years, Ferris State University has prided itself on being an institution of higher education that welcomes those who have served their country in times of both war and peace. Like many colleges and universities, Ferris saw a surge of enrollment after World War II as veterans made use of the G.I. Bill to continue the achievements of what has come to be known as "The Greatest Generation." After the Vietnam War, Ferris helped many soldiers transition from their experiences in Southeast Asia back to civilian life.

When those veterans from the 1960s and early 1970s returned to Michigan they found in what was then Ferris State College a place where they could be themselves, get the education they needed for the next stage of their lives, and develop friendships with veterans and non-veterans alike. The career-oriented education at Ferris State University provided then and provides now an excellent transition from the military workforce to civilian employment. Many things have changed at Ferris since 1945 and 1975, but the fact that our University is a place where veterans are welcomed whole-heartedly remains the same.

Ferris State University assists veterans during their transition to our university with a full-time administrative position devoted to veterans, certifying their GI Bill benefits, and acting as a liaison to military members and their families. There are a number of specific scholarships, initiatives and organizations Ferris sponsors that today help veterans receive the education they seek. With their military background and a degree from Ferris State University, they, like their predecessors, will have an extraordinary array of military service and educational experiences to offer employers.

Among those resources available to veterans at Ferris are the Ferris Military Veteran Scholarship Program, in-state tuition guarantees, an award-winning Student Veterans Association, and an expedited admission agreement with the Marine Corps Installations West. To help veterans be aware of the opportunities available to them, Ferris periodically highlights the success of veterans on our campuses as examples to others. Recently we published a story in our publication, *Ferris Magazine*, highlighting the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistant Improvements Act of 2010 to help make veterans who may be eligible aware of these bills' benefits.

Beyond these programs, most important is an attitude that permeates the institution. Ferris State University does not just accommodate veterans, it actively seeks them, providing services and support that aids the veterans' transition into college and their success while enrolled. Here are just a few of the highlights of the ways in which Ferris State University welcomes veterans and prizes their sacrifice.

#### **Military Veteran Scholarship Program**

Ferris offers veterans a \$1,000 annual scholarship beginning with their first year and renewable for three additional years. Both entering freshmen and transfer students qualify for this award.

Eligibility criteria include -

- Having served on an active duty status in U.S. Armed Forces, including Army Reserve or National Guard when federally activated, for a minimum of six continuous months for purposes other than training.
- Having been separated under Honorable or Uncharacterized conditions.
- Maintaining satisfactory academic progress per federal financial aid regulations.

The Military Veterans Scholarship, although modest, is an important resource for veterans looking to earn a college degree. The greater importance of this scholarship is that it does not exist in isolation – it is a part of the entire environment Ferris State University provides for those who have served their country. Ferris adds to the Military Veterans Scholarship by offering in-state tuition rates.

### **In-State Tuition for Veterans**

In 2007, Ferris State University's Board of Trustees approved a special tuition agreement for active duty military personnel. The agreement offers in-state tuition to active duty military personnel, their spouses and dependents if the member of the Armed Forces is a Michigan resident, has not established residency elsewhere, or is stationed in Michigan.

Normally, a student cannot attain resident status until they have lived in Michigan for one full year prior to their application for a residential status change. However, the waiver of this requirement recognizes the important role that veterans play at Ferris. The type of education Ferris provides, which helps students prepare for successful careers upon graduation, is extraordinarily well-suited to help veterans make the transition back to civilian life. Combined with Ferris' Military Scholarship Program, and outside resources such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, this program helps make a difference for the men and women who have served, and in many cases continue to serve.

### **Ferris Students Called to Active Duty**

During the conflict in Iraq and with continued engagement in Afghanistan, more Ferris students have been called to active duty than at any time in our recent past. As president I have asked that our registrar's office contact me every time a student is called to active duty. Each person receives a note from me thanking them for serving our country and assuring them that we have a place at Ferris when they have completed their service obligation. I encourage each student to return to their education and ask they contact me if assistance is needed in doing so. Additionally if a student has an interest in a Ferris sweatshirt or flag to take with them we also provide this.

Most often the military schedule does not align with the university academic calendar. If possible we make arrangements for the student to finish their current classes either on-line or by independent study. If this is not practical we process a withdrawal from the classes that does not count against their academic or financial aid record and refund their tuition for the semester.

### **Ferris Veterans Association**

A university can undertake to approve any number of scholarships and programs to help veterans, but if an overall environment allowing veterans to thrive is lacking, then those initiatives will ultimately prove hollow. Veterans often experience similar challenges in returning or enrolling in school. It is especially helpful to have a support group of veterans on campus to help others in this transition and in establishing a pattern of success in college. Ferris State University has such a veterans group and provides them dedicated space in our student union.

The Ferris Veterans Association received the "2010 Best Chapter in the Midwest" award out of 63 such organizations in a 10-state region. The award speaks to Ferris' strong tradition of providing for the needs of veterans. Ferris' Veterans Association, a registered student organization, is dedicated to advocating for veterans at Ferris. Committed to ensuring that their educational needs are met and that their transition to college is as seamless as possible, the organization seeks to be an outlet through which a series of services are available to veterans on campus.

### **Marine Corps Installations West Leadership Scholar Program**

Ferris has recently entered into a memorandum of understanding with Marine Corps Installations West. The purpose of this agreement is to establish a partnership between the two parties to provide departing service members an opportunity for special admission to Ferris. As noted earlier, I believe that Ferris' career-oriented degree offerings are an especially good match for students with the kind of experiences that members of our military bring with them to the classroom.

One of the challenges that those serving in the military can face in their transition to civilian life is navigating the non-military institutions, rules and regulations they encounter as they embark upon their path toward a college degree. This Leadership Scholar Program establishes procedures that allow the Marine Corps Installations West to ensure that candidates for admission to Ferris meet the university's admission requirements. The LSP also helps assure that other administrative requirements have been met. This can be very important for those departing the military. Once a candidate is in the classroom, they stand a very good chance of earning a degree. These chances have also been augmented by provisions of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which streamlines payment of tuition directly to a college or university, relieving students of the need to take out loans to cover tuition until they are reimbursed.

### **Other Ferris Resources and Initiatives for Veterans**

I want to stress again that Ferris has a long history of welcoming veterans and that this welcome is not limited to official policies, but is a part of the everyday life of our university. Some of the indications of this include

- Ferris' membership in Servicemembers Opportunity College ([www.soc.aascu.org](http://www.soc.aascu.org)). This is a consortium of universities and colleges which have agreed to programming policies that support military service members (i.e. evaluating and accepting college credit for military training and/or experience).
- The University has been recognized as a "Military Friendly" school by GI Jobs (<http://www.militaryfriendlyschools.com/search/profile.aspx?id=169910>).
- Ferris State has worked with General Robert W. Smith, III, director of the Veterans' Serviced Division of the State of Michigan, regarding the University's programming support of military members and veterans at the University, and seeks through his assistance to employ veterans at the University.
- In collaborative support of military members attending universities and colleges throughout the State of Michigan, Ferris has volunteered to act as host site for U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs training of certifying officials this coming August.
- Ferris helps maintain a room in our Rankin Student Center where veterans can come together informally to socialize and make use of computers and other resources.

- As a University we have provided supportive programming that has helped the Ferris ROTC grow from just a few students to what we anticipate will be more than 60 cadets this fall.
- A campus committee is currently exploring additional options on what our university can do for veterans.

Attached to this information is a recent article written by Retired Chief Master Sgt. Mark S. Brechja, former 412<sup>th</sup> Test Wing Command Chief. Sgt. Brechja, who enrolled at Ferris this past fall, is a part of the Troops to Teachers program here. I first met Sgt. Brechja at our football game on September 11, 2010. Halftime at this game was organized as a salute to veterans, and we recognized them on the field. As part of this ceremony Sgt. Brechja addressed the entire stadium. It was an electrifying moment.

Also attached is the *Ferris Magazine* article about the Post-9/11 GI Bill highlighting the experience of Ferris student Retired Staff Sgt. Stephen Neshkoff. Before becoming a Ferris student, Stephen served in the Air Force as “nuclear cop,” while stationed at Malmstrom Air Force Base. He went from escorting missiles to providing security for such VIPs as presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, as well as Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and others. He also served a nine-month tour in Iraq. Despite this remarkable wealth of experience, he had a hard time getting accepted at a university. “I signed up for the military in March of 2002. I took the ACTs that month and didn’t really care,” he says. “Ferris gave me a chance to get my degree, and I’ve held a 3.4 GPA for three years.”

Mr. Neshkoff’s story illustrates many things about the experiences of those looking to earn degrees after serving their country. The most important thing his story illustrates is that each person brings their own unique set of experiences with them. Those who serve their country are as diverse and many-faceted as any other group of students. The other important thing his story shows is that the time these students have spent in the military is often a time when they came of age and began to realize their potential.

Through the stories of men and women like Sgt. Brechja and Sgt. Neshkoff, Ferris State University encourages veterans to enroll and attend. The GI Bill benefits are a wonderful resource, but some veterans have to be encouraged to use them. Hearing from other veterans with stories like their own can help provide this support and encouragement.

Ferris is proud to have a long history of being a place that welcomes people like Mark Brechja and Stephen Neshkoff, and offers them the resources they need to earn a degree which will facilitate the next chapter of their lives. Ferris is not just a resource for veterans like Sgt. Brechja and Neshkoff – Stephen, Mark, and others like them are an important resource for our university. The experiences our veterans bring with them make for a campus that has students who elevate classroom discussion and provide important real-world perspective.

Thank you for this chance to give testimony about the opportunities Ferris State University provides to veterans. This tradition of opportunity is important to our understanding of who we are as an institution of higher education. Our mission statement maintains that “Ferris State University prepares students for successful careers, responsible citizenship, and lifelong learning. Through its many partnerships and its career-oriented, broad-based education, Ferris services our rapidly changing global economy and society.” It is hard to imagine a group of students who better understand a global perspective, responsible citizenship and the need for lifelong learning than our veterans.

News » My education journey: College degree "a must" -- reality after active duty

## My education journey: College degree "a must" -- reality after active duty

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by Retired Chief Master Sgt. Mark S. Brejcha  
Former 412th Test Wing Command Chief

5/2/2011 - **BIG RAPIDS, Mich.** -- "The opportunity of a lifetime must be taken in the lifetime of the opportunity." - Author Unknown

In 2010, I went back to the future. After serving nearly 30 years in the Air Force, my family and I decided to retire and move back to our "Norman Rockwell-ish" town of Big Rapids, Mich., where I'm currently going to college at Ferris State University. It's hard to believe that I'm a full-time college student again, finishing now what I failed to complete back in 1977 -- my bachelor's degree. But I'm doing it thanks to the education benefits I earned while serving this great nation. With the post-9/11 G.I. Bill, I have my tuition, books and a housing stipend paid for by Uncle Sam. In addition, I've been accepted into the teaching program at Ferris State and will be partnering with the national Troops to Teachers program to earn my teaching certificate so I can make a difference in the lives of young people. Life is good.

In my pursuit to go to college full-time, two things quickly became crystal clear: 1) College campuses across the country are very military friendly and accommodating, and 2) The civilian job market recognizes your degree first, military experience second.

Whether separating or retiring from the Air Force, you will not be alone on campus if you decide to go to college for the first time or go "back to college." Most college campuses throughout the United States have veteran's assistance offices that will guide you in your education journey. Along with the veteran's assistance office, many campuses have a veteran's support group that can help you connect with former G.I.s from all branches of service. Ferris State's veterans group is a regional leader in this, and I'm proud to be a member. Two great Americans out of the 400 veteran students on the Ferris State campus are former Air Force active duty enlisted members -- Steve Neshkoff and Brian Nanko.

Steve is currently attending Ferris full-time on the post-9/11 G.I. Bill. At Ferris, he's a stand-out on the track and cross-country teams and he'll be graduating in spring 2012 with a teaching degree in history education. His education journey began in 2002 when he enlisted in the Air Force as a Security Forces member; serving in the missile fields of Montana, Camp Bucca, Iraq, and even Air Force One. Steve shares, "It was difficult taking college classes while on active duty due to the high tempo of my job, always wanting to be focused on-task and living up to our core values. It wasn't until I got out of the Air Force at the end of my six year enlistment that I decided to pursue and finish my undergraduate degree full-time."

As a former NCO, Steve encourages all first-terms not to wait: "Take it one class at a time and pursue that degree slowly, ensuring that you have something to use (transfer credits) if you decide to leave after your first-term. Don't be that person that gets out without an education plan. If you decide to go to college, then do it. Don't wait."

Like Steve, Staff Sgt. Brian Nanko -- now an Air Crew Flight Equipment technician with the 110th Airlift Wing in the Michigan Air National Guard -- has also taken advantage of education benefits post active-duty. "Several things brought me back home to Michigan," says Brian. "I still wanted to serve in the Air Force, so I joined the Air National Guard out of Battle Creek. I also love to work with metal, and being able to attend the Ferris welding engineering program on the Chapter 33 G.I. Bill (post-9/11) will give me the opportunity I need to be successful in the civilian sector."

Sergeant Nanko, who started his education journey while on active duty (taking basic courses), will simultaneously complete his Community College of the Air Force degree and graduate from Ferris this spring with a bachelor's degree in welding engineering. Brian has this to say to current Air Force NCOs about a CCAF degree: "It's silly not to get a CCAF degree. An NCO needs to set the example. For me, I think that learning should be a never-ending pursuit. If not, our Airmen may become complacent in their knowledge and be left behind. Our nation deserves a military that has the edge in an ever-changing world, and education gives us that."

The second revelation about going to college is the stark reality about the U.S. job market and the decline of jobs that don't require a degree. For me, 30 years active duty, two CCAF degrees, and retiring as a "command chief" amounts to a lot of pats on the back, but it won't get me to the job interview. In most cases, the civilian job sector requires a college degree (bachelor's or master's level), and human resources departments are usually constrained in allowing non-degree holding candidates to compete for a posted job. If that reality doesn't sober you up, maybe this will -- a 22 year old college graduate with very little work experience will make it to the job interview while a 20 year master sergeant or a 30 year chief get a nice conciliatory letter thanking them for submitting their application. Stark reality indeed.

Reality always has another part to it, so let's recreate that previous job prospect by placing an undergraduate degree in the hands of the former G.I. A bachelor's degree (in most cases), plus military service experience, leads to the interview. The educated, prior-enlisted G.I. now has what I call the "unstoppable resume." The interview usually lands the job -- hands down. That 22 year old can

### Photos



Ferris State University students Mark Brejcha, Staff Sgt. Brian Nanko and Steve Neshkoff pose at the campus library during finals week. Taking advantage of educational benefits started for these three while on active duty and continues today. Mr. Brejcha and Sergeant Nanko will graduate this spring, while Mr. Neshkoff is entering his senior year. (Courtesy photo)

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no longer compete. He or she now get the conciliatory letter because two important things are lacking ... leadership and work experience.

Civilian employers love college-educated former G.I.'s. The reputation of those who have served in the military is still held in high regard on the outside. This is a huge plus when looking for a job. However, employers can't hire you if you haven't earned a degree -- it's that simple. First get your CCAF degree, and then quickly get your undergraduate degree while you're on active duty. This is our current reality; this is our truth in the enlisted world.

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